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# Collaboration modes, preconditions, and contingencies in organizational alliance: A comparative assessment<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Collaboration indicates management intention for new competence and knowledge development by collective and inter-supportive means. From a pragmatic point of view, business organizations see collaboration as an opportunity for new competitiveness and efficiency, and public authorities also perceive collaboration as a means to prescribe unified solutions to social issues. Beyond these pragmatic views, academics' conceptions of collaboration give rise to categories of theoretic paradigms for strategic decisions. This research reviews all these perspectives.

This research also examines collaboration modes and contingencies in specific situations and assesses their association with contextual collaboration preconditions. This examination explains the association in terms of collaboration values or scopes (why), its forms or patterns (how) and its coordination, leadership and governance role (who), and its contexts (where and when). To do so, the research uses a case study of a publicly funded cross-sectoral innovation collaboration project.

The case-based propositions and the theoretic assessment cross-examine the validity with each other, resulting in a discursive method to develop the collaboration theory for practices. The research concludes with a remark on the role of conveners in directing and managing collaboration. This research contributes to an epistemological conflation in collaboration management, strategic alliances, and social innovation.

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## 1. Background

The early studies of cross-organizational alliance and cooperation strategies pay great attention to synergetic values and advantages of collaboration such as trust, common goals, mutuality, and complementary competence. These studies also examine forms of controls, governance, or organizational infrastructures for effective collaboration (Beamish & Lupton, 2015; Child & Yan, 1999; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Rugman, D'Cruz, & Verbeke, 1995; Tallman & Shenkar, 1994). Most of these similar studies explain collaboration in phenomenal evidence, trying to provide practical implications rather than theoretic breakthrough.

In the recent decades, collaboration studies have shifted their attention toward theoretic corroboration using various paradigms. The popular paradigms include: (1) Transaction cost economics, (2) resource-based view of organizational competence, (3) resource dependence theory, (4) governance and administration for justice,

and (5) knowledge development and organizational learning. For instance, Hamieda and Brey (2015); Macher and Richman (2008) and Wolter and Veloso (2008) apply the theory of transaction cost economics to justify a twofold purpose in organizational collaboration and strategic alliance: To minimize cost inefficiency and to explain prescriptively the choice for different collaboration modes (i.e., interaction forms and methods). The transaction cost economics theory treats opportunity cost as the key reason for collaboration. Arguably, this rationale cannot satisfy most of academic inquiries about motivations and outcomes of cross-organization collaboration such as vision sharing, mutuality building, and conflict resolutions (Gray, 1996).

Resource-based and resource dependence views are the other competing theoretic paradigms. They posit collaboration as an external resource to extend organizational competence, market power, or vitality (Hillman, Withers, & Collins, 2009; Martin-Rios, 2014). Theories in social governance and knowledge management contrarily assert collaboration as an internalized measure for management transparency, fairness, and resolving misunderstanding and misconduct across organizations and institutions (Sakarya, Bodur, Yildirim-Öktem, & Selekler-Göksen, 2012). Knowledge management conceives collaboration as a means to advance knowledge collectively both at organizational and social levels (Gray, 2000). Because these research designs are theory-driven, results tend to be theory-generated. As such, the collaboration studies often corroborate different, sometimes antithetic, results in

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similar collaboration contexts. Skeptics so arise. Thomson and Perry (2006) attribute this skepticism to the collaboration's transient, abstruse qualities (i.e., mutuality, norms, autonomy, governance, trust, common goals, and commitment) and changes of external environment. Collaboration is still happening in a black box (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Huxham & Vangen, 2000).

This research takes Gestalt's perspective that the whole of a system is not similar to the sum of its individual parts (Woodside, 2013). Therefore, this research proposes a configurational and comparative meta-analytic framework that comprehends collaboration with its preconditions in terms of scopes, structures, and underlying belief/philosophies, and contextualizes collaboration into two coordination modes (i.e., legitimizing collaboration and interfluent collaboration) along a spectrum of collaboration contingencies.

The configurational framework aims at predicting and harnessing collaboration in real life practices.

## 2. Modes and contingencies in collaboration contexts

### 2.1. Collaboration modes

Collaboration modes concern forms, patterns, or conditions that describe and justify collaborative activity structures and control interactions among collaboration units. An organization can build on a collaboration structure through management programs, documentation and legitimized accountability, or through technology supports. In a course of collaboration, work units should ensure adequate interaction for information, view and opinion exchange, and eventually conclude solutions. A formal mode of collaboration can regulate and assure adequate exchange and contributions among interacting work units. Such regulations and assurance legitimize duty specification and accountability. Contrarily, an informal mode takes advantages of immediate, spontaneous interaction, and emphasizes on mutual responsiveness at all phases of collaboration, rather than on formal, accountable interaction results. In some cases, management cannot judge how large a collaboration scale is, or for how long a collaboration will run. Specifying and regulating the way individuals interact likely imposes undesirable restrictions on voluntary, improvisatory contributions. An informal collaboration mode encourages a sense of group identity, involvement, and conflation of knowledge, which are key elements of social innovation that public administration and policy makers often call for.

Literature about social and public alliance treat collaboration values more on deontological grounds. This thought mainly bases on collective benefits of morality that management expects to gain during the course of collaborative work. The collaboration is less successful when interacting units cannot take the perspectives of each other or tend to disprove the other's principles and view (Henrich & Henrich, 2007; Hoang & Rothaermel, 2005). Therefore, management should attain collective goals and directions using negotiation and politicking as collaboration means. When stakeholder sizes are particularly large, like in cross-institutional projects, collaboration cannot simply adopt systematizing principles to legitimate collaboration work and process. Instead of being explicit about structures, regulations and procedures, participation in collaboration should be more liberal and spontaneous. Individuals will consider balances between own interests and collective interests, compare their own personal value concepts against collective collaboration norm, and calculate suffering in collaboration in consideration of gaining larger or future benefit in return. The collaboration mode can be patchy, interfluent, and non-predetermined. Management finds difficult to rule individuals' inclination for collaboration.

Collaboration also occurs in situations where co-working people, or groups, still perform in their own work patterns, and exercise judgment autonomously. The interactions are transient and situation-specific, likely owing to different task requirements (Beyerlein, Freedman, McGee, & Moran, 2002; Staudenmayer, Tripsas, & Tucci, 2005; To &

Harwood, 2000). Management has to systematize collaboration within a structure with various patterns of approved connectivity. This connectivity rationalizes collaboration inputs and outputs, which in turn legitimize interactions (relationships) for collaboration progress control. Such thought commonly applies to today's organizations to reconceive known and applied knowledge for new solutions. Notably, legitimacy imposes various structural adherences to approve or disprove contributions among collaboration teams. The collaboration mode becomes more structuralistic and formalistic.

In organizations, collaboration contexts determine collaboration process and collaboration modes. A collaboration context can comprise key preconditions of its scopes or values, structures, collaborators' behavior, roles, leadership and philosophies. Table 1 contrasts the collaboration precondition characteristics in the two collaboration modes. A scrutiny of such preconditions does not simply give suggestions for planning and coordinating collaboration tasks, but also advantages for coping with different collaboration contingencies.

### 2.2. Managing collaboration contingencies

Collaboration contingencies refer to tactics in specific events or situations, by which a collaboration process pursues and serves its own particular purposes. Previous literature reveals two generic contingencies for collaboration within or across organizations: (1) More market possibilities in strategic alliance studies, and (2) better collective (i.e., social) innovation for organizational/institutional development. The first contingency stems from seeking competitiveness in markets, like the access of external resources, facilities, intellectual rights (Hoang & Rothaermel, 2005), shared risk (Beamish & Lupton, 2015; To & Ko, 2015), efficiency improvement, organization-wide learning (Benavides-Espinosa & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2014; Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2011; Pertusa-Ortega, Zaragoza-Saez, & Claver-Cortes, 2009), and even moral imperatives (Gray, 1989, 2000; Sakarya et al., 2012).

The second contingency attains more achievements, which include appreciative planning (i.e., vision sharing), policy revisitations across generations for sakes of sustainability, changes of social hierarchy, and even shifts in resource/power distribution in institutional devolution (Crawford-Mathis, Darr, & Farmer, 2010; Ross et al., 2010). Through collaboration, the interested parties dialog to resolve differences and/or conflicts. In the end, a collaboration process results in types of social innovation far beyond individual achievement. This contingency purports at building trust and reciprocity in collaboration environments. The contingency brings out an important collaboration implication: Increasing trust and coalescence can expand scopes of common interests and encourage acceptance to new administrative or managerial initiatives (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Johnston, Hick, Nan, & Auer, 2011; Kettl, 2006; Pasqueto, 1991). Therefore, collaboration can bring up other values such as social reputation, that is, long-term cultural recognition and acceptance in international contexts (Vigoda-Gadot, 2003).

**Table 1**  
Comparison of key collaboration preconditions in two collaboration modes.

Phenomenal collaboration preconditions:	Collaboration mode	
	Systematizing	Interfluent
Clear scope of collaboration	✓	Ambiguous
Organized structure and connectivity	✓	×
Mutuality behavior	Partial	✓
Formal (functional) roles	✓	×
Convener-ship	Intervening	Influencing
Philosophy behind co-work	Consistence	Empathizing
	Coherence	Empowering

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